

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

A Study in Late-Victorian Feminine Consciousness
and Creative Expression

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ABSTRACT

With the aim of placing Mrs. Humphry Ward in the female literary tradition as a typically late-Victorian writer this study analyses three of her novels in relation to the personal and historical contexts in which they were written. It is shown how Mrs. Humphry Ward gives expression to the tension between polarities within sexual ideology on four broad issues crucial to female self-definition: marriage, professional work, politics, and intellectual training.

In Chapter I, dealing with Marcella (1894), Mrs. Humphry Ward's ambivalent attitude towards marriage is found in a tension between the social ideal of equality and the Ruskinian ideal of womanly submission, both espoused in the novel.

In Chapter II, again dealing with Marcella, Mrs. Humphry Ward's unresolved attitude towards women and professional work is located in a tension between two different narrative strategies. The novel is here approached as a Bildungsroman.

In Chapter III, dealing with Sir George Tressady (1896), Mrs. Humphry Ward's ambivalence on the Issue of women and politics is shown to exist in two competing centres of consciousness: one male, one female.

In Chapter IV, dealing with Helbeck of Bannisdale (1898), Mrs. Humphry Ward's ambivalence towards women and intellectual training is traced in a particular distribution of roles according to sex. The recognition of this distribution of roles helps to explain the paradoxical situation of the novel's female protagonist.